

MINI HANDBALL – HANDBALL AT SCHOOL PROJECT IN SERBIA

Milan Petronijevic

Serbian Handball Federation, Belgrade, Serbia

Summary

The Serbian Handball Federation (SHF) initiated a **Mini Handball – Handball at School** project with the primary goal of launching handball teams on a wide scale in Elementary Schools across Serbia. This was set as one of the main priorities of the Serbian Handball Federation for 2010 and for the upcoming years, during the preparation for the EURO 2012. The additional aim of this project is to promote and popularize handball among elementary school children all over Serbia. There was a great opportunity to involve many school children in handball and to increase its popularity in Serbia. Complete implementation of the Mini Handball – Handball at School project in elementary schools is planned to be concluded by the year 2013, with the first notable results expected in the year 2012, when the 10th European Championship was scheduled to be held in Serbia.

Specifically, the project was conceptualised to include children from the 1st to the 4th school grade, in the 6-10 age groups, for both boys and girls. Preliminary data for the school year 2010-11, indicated that 113 elementary public schools were involved in the project, with a total of 13.560 pupils. The school children (N=111) were evaluated based on their motivation to join the handball school teams. Having a good friend among the teammates was also a strong motivating factor to join their school team. Based on the number of children enrolled, it has been concluded that mini handball is a dynamic and interesting game that may become the most adopted sport for children of this school age. In the months following the programme launch, a large number of schools adopted Handball as a part of their curriculum and during the year 2011 SHF registered more than 5.000 new players.

Our conclusion is that this program is an excellent way to promote sport in general and especially handball among youngsters. Serbian Handball Federation (SHF) has great expectations of this project based on the encouraging preliminary results.

Key words: handball, children, age group 6-10, elementary school

Introduction

In the years of preparation preceding the EURO 2012, Serbian Handball Federation (SHF) has initiated the **Mini Handball – Handball at School** Project, which was determined as one of the main priorities of the Federation. The aim of this project was to implement the Mini Handball as long-term project, and to promote and popularize Mini Handball among school children all over Serbia. The other project tasks were: (i) Promoting youth sport; (ii) Popularizing the Mini Handball philosophy; (iii) Increasing sport education among youngsters; (iv) Introducing fair play commitment; (v) Introducing the local handball clubs and motivating children to join their youth selections; (vi) Establishing the Mini Handball School League and Tournaments; (vii) Promoting the EURO 2012 event; (viii) Educating the pupils how to support the National Team and other handball teams. At the same time, there is a growing body of literature supporting the health benefits of physical activity in young people (1-3). Low levels of physical activity are partially responsible for obesity and other health problems among youngsters. In Serbia, a vast percentage of physical activity occurs outside of physical education classes. Participation in youth sports programs allows children to obtain the recommended level of physical activity and to reduce health risks (1).

The purpose of this project was not only to promote handball but also to reduce the aforementioned health-related problems, ensure better position of handball in the curriculum of physical education, and evaluate children's motivation factors in joining the Project and their handball school teams.

Methods

Subjects were 1st to 4th school grade children attending three public primary schools in Belgrade, Serbia. Two participation criteria were established for the school selection. Firstly, the local community in which the schools were located over the past several years offered a lot of free-of-charge sport programs for school children. It provided programs where children had fun and got acquainted with different physical activities (swimming, athletics, basketball, volleyball). All program activities were conducted by physical education teachers, sport specific coaches and volunteers from the local community. Secondly, since the Serbian Handball Federation is found in Belgrade, it was easy to organize and establish the collaboration with schools and the local community for the implementation of the project.

A total of 613 children were enrolled in these three schools. All parents were mailed a form and instructed to return the form to the school if they did not wish for their child to participate in the project. Children were free to refuse participation at any time. The decline rate was about 5%. We sampled a total of 111 school children aged between 9 and 10.

We collected data during the 1st class meeting. We informed the pupils that the participation was voluntary and the responses confidential. The great majority of school children chose to participate. We instructed them to respond honestly, and the author was available to answer all the questions. Most participants completed the questionnaires in less than 10 minutes. All data analyses were conducted by using the PC Statistical Package.

A questionnaire was designed to measure how children are informed about handball, to measure their recent sport program participation, and their motivation factors in joining the project and handball school teams. Children were inquired about their previous handball experience: "Have you ever played handball in a school or in a club?"; "Have you ever watched a handball match?". Physical/sport activity was assessed through questions such as: "Are you currently practicing any sport?". The evaluation of motivational factors was done and was retested after the first handball lessons.

Development (Results, Discussion)

Handball as part of the Primary School Curriculum

In public primary schools in Serbia, handball is part of the Physical Education curriculum. Physical education teachers should introduce handball to the pupils of the 5th grade. Pupils should have the opportunity to play handball and learn the basic handball skills, and be evaluated based on their improvement and knowledge.

Pupils can also choose a sport they would like to practice during the school year, from a list of available sports. Handball is part of the official school list and pupils should have the opportunity to play handball in their schools once a week. This subject is called: **Optional Sport Discipline**.

Unfortunately, we must admit that handball in Serbian primary schools is not present as it should be. There are very few schools including handball in their curricula, and handball is usually taught by the PE teachers who were once engaged in handball (former players, coaches, etc.). There are various reasons for this situation, and one of the most common arguments is that the size of school gyms & sport halls is too small for a handball court; handball rules are too complicated; handball tactics are not so clear; handball is too aggressive for pupils, etc. It is obvious that PE teachers are not well informed about the philosophy of Mini Handball and the possibility of its implementation in PE classes.

Being very well aware of the abovementioned facts, the Serbian Handball Federation would like to change the status of handball in schools through the implementation of the Mini Handball – Handball at School Project. Therefore, our aim is to introduce handball to every single student in Serbia.

Project description

For the implementation of this Project, the role of Regional Mini Handball instructors is essential. The Serbian Handball Federation has organized several seminars for this purpose and we have registered over 50 instructors all over Serbia. Their task is to present SHF and promote the Mini Handball Project in the regions where they have been appointed; their first task being to introduce the project to the school principals and to motivate schools to join the Project. After joining the project, promotion of Mini Handball will be organized in schools. Promotional activities were performed by the Mini Handball Instructor and the local Handball Club representatives (handball players and coaches). The PE teachers, in collaboration with the SHF Project representatives, organised an Inter-School Mini Handball Tournament, and other entertaining handball activities. They were instructed to form a Mini Handball School Team, at least one boys' and one girls' team (mixed team also acceptable). School teams should have a training session at least once a week. After school teams were established in other primary schools from the same region (town or municipality), the SHF started organising Mini Handball Tournaments and Mini Handball Regional School Leagues. Schools established their fan clubs and supporters. One of the most important project tasks was to educate the youngsters how to support their own teams and to respect the opponents. Our aim was to form an extremely wide support for the National Handball Team for the EURO 2012 in Serbia.

SHF was strongly motivating schools to participate in the Project and to choose Mini Handball as the most convenient sport for boys and girls of the 4th and 5th grade. The schools, where Mini Handball was part of the subject "**Optional Sport Discipline**", received special treatment and support by the SHF.

SHF and the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education in Belgrade organized three Mini Handball seminars for PE teachers and other school teachers. So far, 200 teachers participated in these seminars, and the SHF plans to continue this process of specialization.

Project Results

In short, results of the implementation of "Mini handball – Handball at School" Project were better than expected.

We have involved **139 public elementary schools** in our Project. Mini handball has been presented to **13.560 pupils** all over Serbia. Between the period September 2010 and June 2011, the Serbian Handball Federation organized **50 Mini handball activities and tournaments**, with **6.709 young players** taking part. There were **4 Regional leagues** with **42 teams** and **559 players**. Admission for the **Regional Mini Handball Instructors** was repeated at the beginning of the last Scholar Season and their total number rose to **50**. The **Mini Handball Seminar for School Teachers and PE Teachers** has become a part of a teacher's permanent educational process within the Serbian Ministry of Education. During the 2010/2011 school season, the seminar was organized all over Serbia with 211 teachers attending it. This Seminar was also approved for the following school season by the Ministry of Education and was a part of the Educational Catalogue for 2011/12.

The Serbian Handball Federation is very satisfied with the Project results after Phase 1. All Project tasks have been accomplished. Our assessment is that there are more than **5.000 new handball players in Serbia** due to the implementation of the Mini Handball – Handball at School Project. Pupils in Serbia are better informed about Handball and Mini Handball. Physical education teachers are better educated and more motivated to play handball with their pupils, and in a great many schools Handball is a very important part of the curriculum. In 42 schools, handball is present as an Optional Sport Discipline, and we expect that this number will increase.

We would like to emphasize the very good collaboration with the EHF and several state institutions on this very important project. The Serbian Handball Federation signed the EHF SMART Program as a long term measure of support for developing handball in Serbia. The project was also supported by the Ministry of Sport and Youth, Ministry of Education, Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, Serbian Olympic Committee and local handball clubs. Serbian local authorities (municipalities and their sport departments) were also of great support to this project. Due to their positive influence and support, school children can play handball during the entire school year. All training sessions are organized by coaches from the local handball clubs, while tournaments and regional leagues are also supported.

Research results

Approximately 62% pupils stated that their sport activities occurred outside of physical education classes. The percentage was similar when genders and grade levels were in question. Across schools, it was reported that fewer boys were taking part in PE classes during the week in comparison to girls. Just 15% reported that they had ever played handball, and 22% had ever watched a handball game. After these statements it was clear that only a small number of pupils would join their school team before a handball presentation. After the first class of handball presentation pupils were retested (interviewed) regarding their impressions of the handball game. Approximately 92% stated that they enjoyed playing handball and that they find mini handball a very dynamic and interesting game, while 61% stated that they would like to play handball constantly. Boys were more motivated to participate in the handball program bearing in mind the competitive aspects, while the girls were more likely to report social reasons for participating in the handball program. Both genders primarily wanted to have fun playing handball and emphasized a good friend among teammates as a strong motivating factor to join their school handball team.

Although in most previous studies a wider age range (7-18 years) is taken into consideration in the study samples, "to have fun" remained the highest ranked reason for sport program participation (4, 5, 6). The number of pupils joining a school handball team was much lower than stated in the questionnaire (61%). The reason for this may be the parents who still think of handball as a tough, brutal sport not suitable for their child. Moreover, recent club and national team results were not encouraging when the entire population was in question. In recent years, basketball, volleyball and tennis became much more popular among youngsters in Serbia, due to the good international results of Serbian teams and athletes. Further research should be conducted in an attempt to understand the different sources of enjoyment and motivation, and their association with school handball program initiation, participation and implementation.

Conclusion

The Serbian Handball Federation is very satisfied with the first project results. A huge number of school children got acquainted with handball and participated in the Project all over Serbia. Handball is more present in PE classes and PE teachers are more educated and motivated to get their pupils to play handball. School children find mini handball a very dynamic and interesting sport game. A good friend among teammates is also a strong motivating factor in joining a school team. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that mini handball may be the most adopted sport game for children at this school stage.

Our opinion is that this project is a good way to promote handball among youngsters. Serbian Handball Federation (SHF) has great expectations of this project and the first results are already encouraging. A large number of schools has accepted handball as a part of their curricula and during the year 2011 SHF has registered more than 5.000 new players.

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